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Flexible Working in Local Authorities 2008

A survey into flexible working in Local Authorities in England & Wales
March 2008

survey

Report of a survey into Flexible Working within Local Authorities in England & Wales

March 2008

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Flexible Working within Local Authorities

Report of Survey 2008

1.   Executive Summary

- *There is an increased business focus for the adoption of flexible working rather than the welfare imperative of work life balance for staff. Cost savings have moved from 15th place in 2006 to 1st 2008 in the league table of drivers whilst work-life balance moved from 3rd to 9$^{th.}$*

- *Since our survey in 2006 there has been a discernible movement in both the implementation and management of flexible working in many of the councils we surveyed. Flexible working is being considered much more seriously as a means to improve business performance than it was in 2006.*

- *The vast majority of authorities (94%) now offer all staff the same right to request flexible working, not just the legal minimum*

- *A high proportion (87%) said that technology has changed the way people work but the constraints of IT systems are identified as the top barrier to progress in flexible working*

- *Working from home occasionally has overtaken flexitime and part-time working to come out as the top flexible working practice. There is however still considerable variation in the progress towards fully implementing flexible working options between and within Councils*

- *Evaluation of the benefits of flexible working is still underdeveloped and inconsistent as in our 2006 survey*

- *Cost reviews of accommodation as part of meeting efficiency targets is driving some Councils to implement increased technology-assisted nomadic and home working*

- *The move to delegate the decision to line managers so that an assessment can be carried out on whether the flexible working can be accommodated within the service requirements has resulted in a lack of knowledge centrally about the range and take up of flexible working*

Challenges

Central services such as business development and human resources staff face a number of challenges in achieving the maximum benefit for the Council from flexible working**.**

• How can the contribution of flexible working be maximised for strategic business benefit when the operational decision has been delegated?

• How can consistency be achieved and lessons learnt identified and shared?

• How can flexible working be equated more directly with service flexibility?

• How can balance be achieved between flexible working as a benefit to individuals and a business benefit to the organisation?

2.   Introduction

By the terms 'flexibility' and 'flexible working', we are describing a wide range of work styles and employment practices. Generally, in this survey, they are used to describe patterns of employment that differ from the traditional fixed hours or traditional shift pattern working with a permanent employment contract. "Flexibility" can therefore relate to any aspect of how, when, and where work is done as well as who does what.

This survey was carried out by telephone during February 2008 mainly with Human Resource and a few Business Development staff. In some cases copies of the questions were sent (without the full analysis categories) to enable responses to be prepared. 22 Councils took part, representing 8 English regions and Wales. This corresponds to a 5% response rate of all local authorities. In order to maintain confidentiality the names of the Council who took part have been withheld.   As we phoned Councils that took part in our previous survey in 2006, with a few additional ones, the sample may be more favourable to flexible working than the majority of Councils.

Where percentages are used they represent the number of responses for that category against the total of surveyed Councils who responded to that question as not all responders gave answers to all the questions.
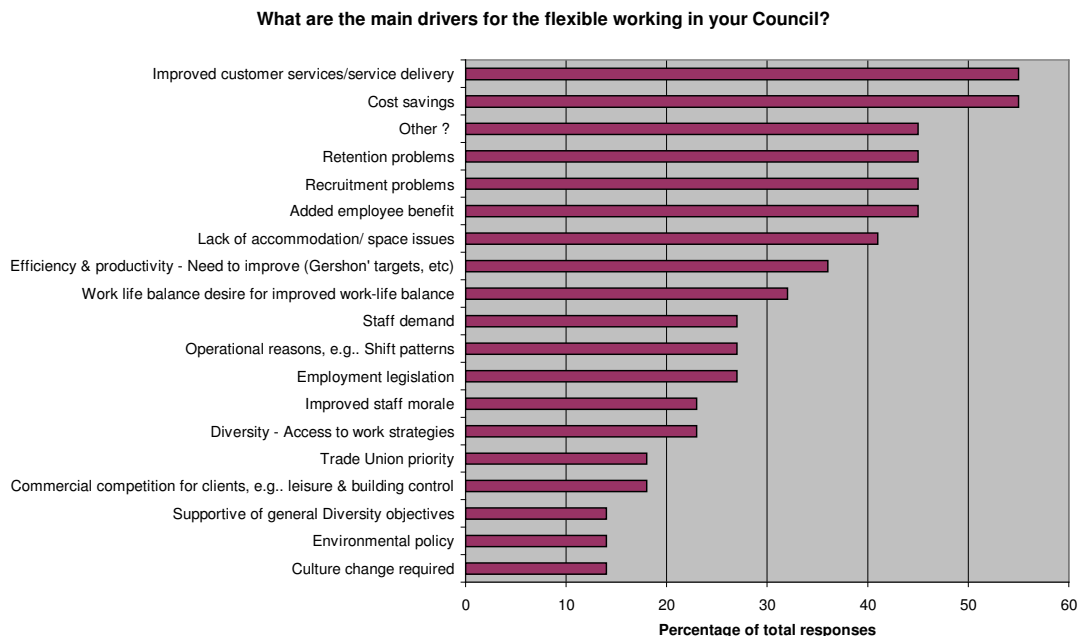
3.   Detailed Results

Question 1: What are the main drivers for flexible working in your Council?

The main drivers in 2008 demonstrate an increased service delivery and business focus with the joint top drivers being cost savings and improved customer service and which were 15th and 4th in the 2006 survey. 55% of all the Councils surveyed mentioned them as main drivers. This is underlined by 'improved staff morale' which has dropped from 8th to 13th in the rankings this year.

This change is demonstrated by the comment of one Council who said that there had been a shift from wellbeing to organisational and financial drivers. The top categories in 2006 were retention and recruitment which are still important drivers being joint 3rd in 2008.

The 'Other' category covers items such as:

- Being the employer of choice
- Corporate asset management
- E-document management, which was coming anyway is seen as an important enabler for flexible working
- Flexible retirement – a lot of interest for staff 60-65

What are the main drivers for the flexible working in your Council?

	Percentage of total responses

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*In the following table comparing Rank Positions in 2008 with those in 2006 – 1 is the best result not the worst.*

What are the main drivers for flexible working in your Council?	Rank in 2008	Rank in 2006
Cost savings	1=	15
Improved service delivery	1=	4=
Added employee benefit	3=	4=
Other	3=	4=
Recruitment problems	3=	1
Retention problems	3=	2
Accommodation issues	7	7
Efficiency & productivity	8	10=
Work life balance	9	3
Employment legislation	10=	9
Operational reasons	10=	17=
Staff demand	10=	10=
Access to work strategies	13=	13=
Improved staff morale	13=	8
Commercial competition	15=	17=
Trade Union priority	15=	13=
Culture change	17=	16
Environmental policy	17=	10=
Diversity objectives	19	17=
Trade Union priority	20	20

Question 2: What evidence do you use to monitor flexible working?

When asked whether they are able to identify hard business results/evidence obtained from existing flexible working practices just over half the Councils (13) said they were able to produce evidence. Respondents were then asked what evidence they used to monitor the benefits and not surprisingly, bearing in mind who was taking part, the answers refer to common HR measure such as staff sickness, turnover (47% referred to these).   However cost reductions and savings has moved from 7th in 2006 to joint 1st in 2008 along with reported sickness rates and increased retention.

A few Councils did comment that it was early days and they are working on developing effective measures and monitoring pilots. This survey suggests that Councils need to develop a comprehensive approach to measuring the effectiveness of flexible working that includes business, HR, financial and productivity measure.

What evidence do you use?
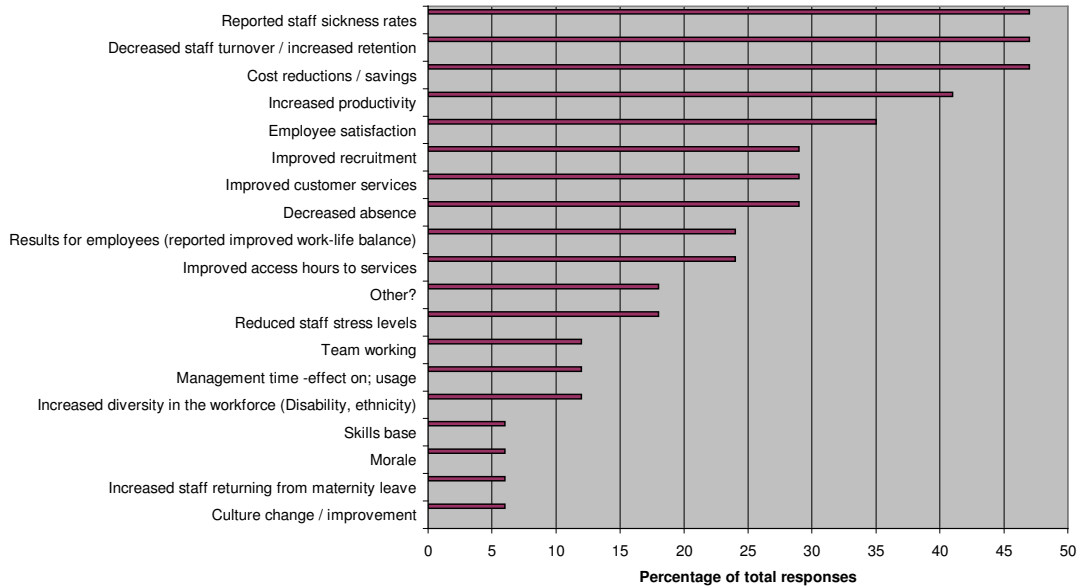
One council reported that an analysis of the absence rates showed that part-time women workers had the lowest absence rate.

Other measures mentioned were extended opening hours, benchmarking figures and availability for meetings.
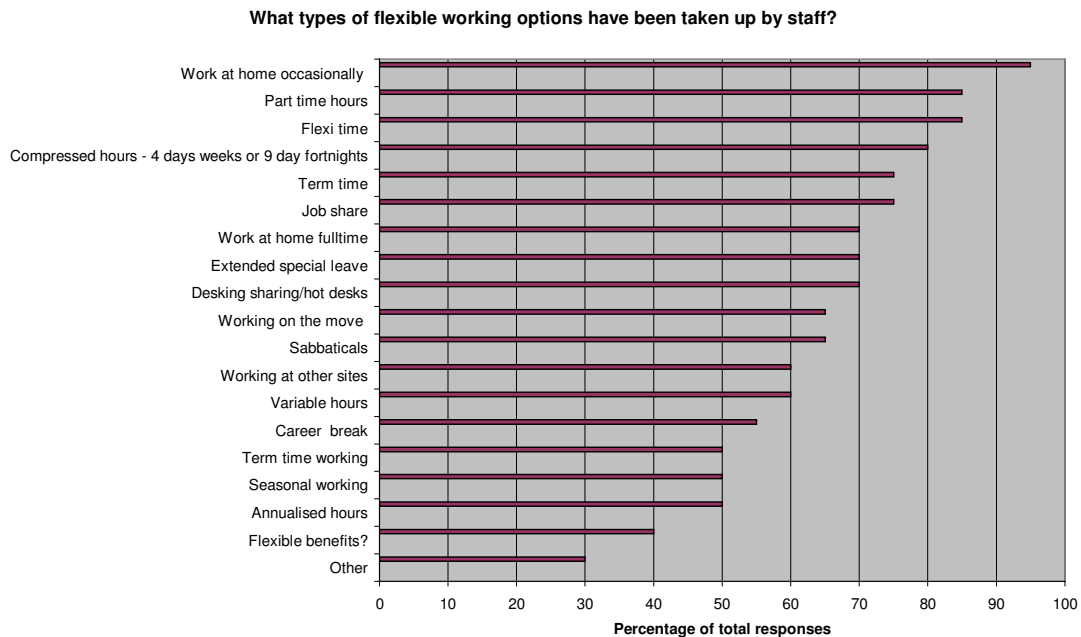
The next question explored the main sources of the evaluation information. The top three were very clear with 75% reported using employee attitude/satisfaction surveys, absence rates (62%) and staff turnover (56%).

What sources do you use to monitor these over time?

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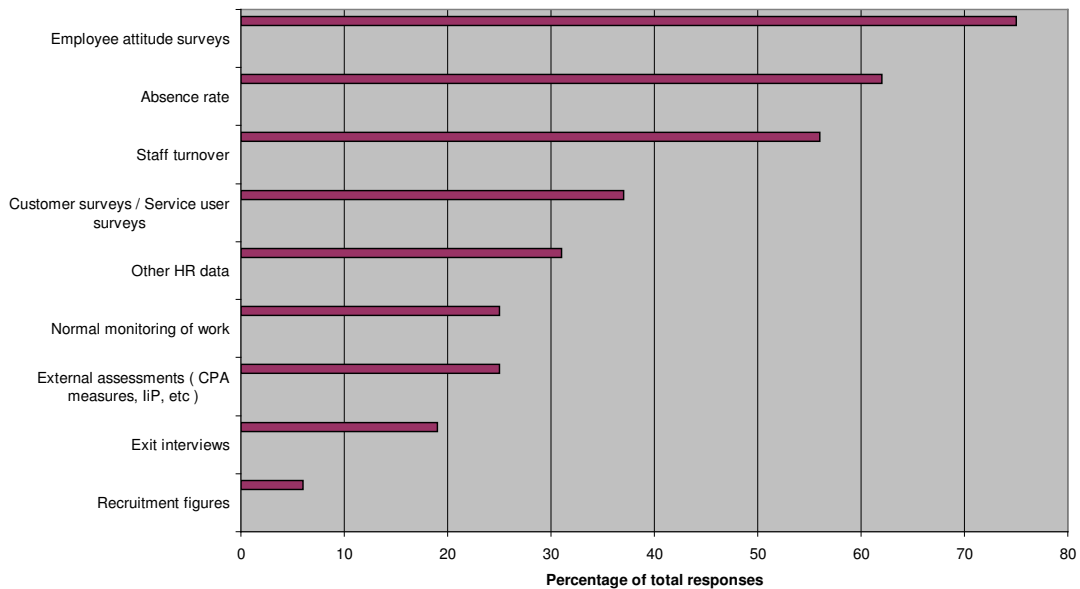
Question 3: What types of flexible working options have been taken up by staff?

For the next group of questions we stressed they were not about policies but about what options had been taken up by staff. The results are given below and demonstrate a wide range of options are being taken up by staff. However some Councils still have scope to extend their flexible working options

What types of flexible working options have been taken up by staff?

Option	Percentage of total responses
Work at home occasionally	95
Part time hours	85
Flexi time	85
Compressed hours - 4 days weeks or 9 day fortnights	80
Term time	75
Job share	75
Work at home fulltime	70
Extended special leave	70
Desking sharing/hot desks	70
Working on the move	65
Sabbaticals	65
Working at other sites	60
Variable hours	60
Career break	55
Term time working	50
Seasonal working	50
Annualised hours	50
Flexible benefits?	40
Other	30

Percentage of total responses

The 'Other' category included: regional/local offices, seasonal work in libraries.

As this question was a qualitative, not all the same categories were present in the responses we received between the two years and so may not have a rank position in each year – care should be taken in interpreting this chart as 1 represent the highest ranked response.

The most popular options remain broadly the same. Term time working has risen to 5th place from 12th in 2006 and extended special leave has risen to 7th from 15th.

What types of flexible working options have been taken up by staff?	Rank in 2008	Rank in 2006
Work at home occasionally	1	4
Flexi time	2=	2
Part time hours	2=	1
Compressed hours - 4 days weeks or 9 day fortnights	4	5
Job share	5=	3
Term time	5=	12
Desking sharing/hot desks	7=	9
Extended special leave	7=	15=
work at home fulltime	7=	0
Sabbaticals	10=	13=
Working on the move	10=	8
Variable hours	12=	6
Working at other sites	12=	0
Career break	14	7
Annualised hours	15=	10
Seasonal working	15=	0
Term time working	15=	0
Flexible benefits	18	15=
Other	19	13=
Regional / Local offices	0	15=
Personal choice of working hours	0	11
Extended special leave	0	18

Questions 4, 5 and 6: Take up across gender, function and grade

We wanted to find out if there were any functions, grades or gender that predominated in the take up of the main types of flexible working. Half the Councils reported that there was equal access to all the options. Therefore the numbers reporting variations was too low to include the quantitative results in detail.

A quarter of the Councils mentioned that access to specific options depended on the jobs staff were doing and the effect on service delivery so was not equal in practice. For example, one London Borough stated that all staff had the right to ask but agreement was dependent on the role.

Another Unitary Authority stated *"Teachers and school based staff are unable to access some hours and location based flexibility and those in office based jobs have limited access to some depending on their role."*

Several Councils mentioned that the grade and gender profile depends on the type of flexible working with more women working part time but more men working mobilely.

We asked questions about whether the take up for working at home and working on the move had any gender or grade bias. The answers are not

indicative of any particular pattern within the Councils we surveyed. Some felt more female staff work at home, others more male staff. One or two mentioned that managerial grades had more access to this way of working.

A large number of functions and jobs were given as working remotely such as: Parks & Gardens, Administration staff, Human Resources, Finance, Executives, Social & Educational Services, Trading Standards, Environmental Health and other Services, Building Control, Planning, Housing, Surveyors, all types of project and policy work,

Question 7: Has the use of technology to work remotely, not just at home, resulted in significant changes in the way the job/work is done

Of the 15 Councils who answered this question, 13 (87%) stated that technology had changed they way they worked which included:

"Remote PC access to our computer system has enabled employees to work from home and removed the need to undertake unnecessary travel back and forth to the office"

"Laptops for visiting staff have enabled them to work mobilely"

"Handhelds – paperwork is completed outside the office and transmitted to office"

Has mobile technology altered the way work is done?

Legend:
- Yes
- No
- Don't know
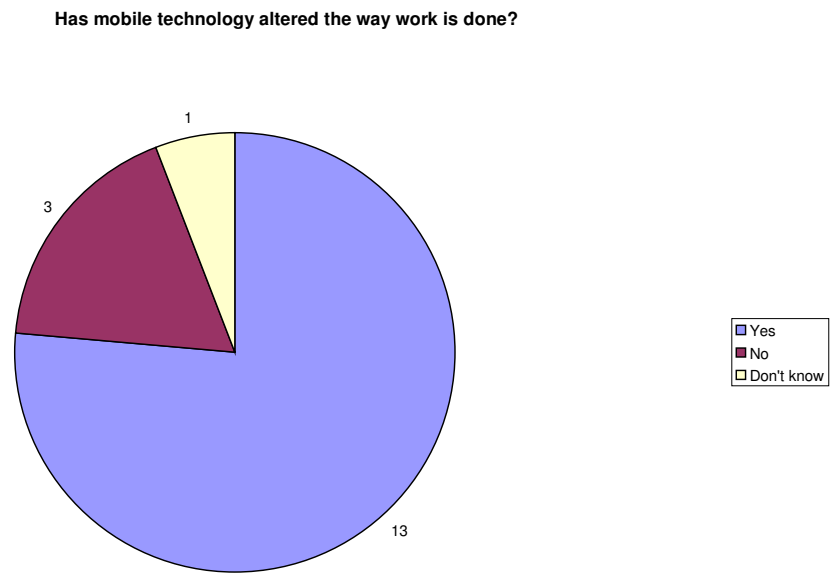
Question 8: How many requests have you had from parents to work flexibly under the 2002 legislation?

The next set of questions explored the experience of 'right to requests' under the legislation within the Council.

The first question asked about the proportion of staff who work part time as a background figure for the requests for flexible working. The 'don't know' category includes some Councils who may have had the figures but they were not accessible during the telephone interview.

What proportion of your staff work full time? %	
Don't Know	8
0-20%	1
20-40	5
40-60	2
60-80	1
80-100	0

In response to the question "How many requests have you had from parents to work flexibly under the 2002 legislation?" 78% said they did not know. This was usually because the decision has been delegated to the line manager and figures are not centrally held.

Is it up to line managers and/or local decision making and record keeping?	
Yes	89%
No	11%
Total responses	19

When asked how many requests had been agreed 60% said all or the vast majority of them had been agreed, 40% did not know.

94% of the Councils extend the right to requests to all staff. Several mentioned that there was a qualifying period.   For instance one Council has a 26 weeks qualification before full access is granted.

76% do not know how many requests have been made from staff not covered by the legislation and 80% did not know how many had been agreed.

We were interested in whether senior staff worked flexibly and the results indicate that some forms are being taken up by a few senior staff though there is clearly room for development in this area.

Do any senior staff work part time?	
Directors	7
Heads of service /functions	10
Managers	17
Individual contributors - Professionals	18

A County Council stated that one Director is working mobilely as a role model.

Another Council stated that out of 164 staff on grade 16 and above, 12 work part time, of which 2 are job sharing.

A few councils said they did not know how many but it was common.

Question 9 What do you think will happen in the next three years to the take up of flexible working?

We wanted to build a picture of where flexible working will be in three years.

Increase slowly	66%
Increase rapidly	33%

No Council reported that flexible working would decrease or stay the same.

In 2006 this was a 50:50 split. Reasons for thinking flexible working will increase included:

"We have all the policies in place and now the focus will be on increasing awareness and take up"

"We have plans to move to new offices with space restrictions so will need hot desking, part time working and occasional home working"

"Lots more people looking for the meaning of work and want to have time for charity and family"

"Ageing workforce – they can now take a pension and still work"

Question 10: In the next year do you intend to extend your flexible working policies or practices?

Just over half the Councils intend to extend flexible working policies in the forthcoming year (down from 67% in 2006): a few less have it in their Corporate Plan.

Some of the plans include:

"Working with staff – what do they need now, how are the policies working"

"Review and update employment terms; review treasury efficiency targets"

"Extend policies and take up to ensure staff in right place after a reorganisation"

"Work well programme will take off over 2008, flexible working policy - striking the balance with TUs and accommodation review will all work together to increase flexibility of location"

"Evaluate each job within each dep't and allocate suitable work style"

"Embedding, next stage, technology, office accommodation"

"We plan to take advantage of developments in technology."

"Flexitime is up for review"

"Child care vouchers and flexible benefits"

Question 10.3: How will you achieve these plans?

Councils are implementing flexible working under a number of different initiatives, which are not mutually exclusive so some Councils gave more than one response.

|	
Accommodation strategy	8
Council wide planned and managed change programme	7
HR driven change/policies	5
Natural development	3
ITC driven strategy	3
Other – cultural shift	3
Local control -up to line managers	2

Question 11: What support do you provide for managers and staff concerning effective working flexibly?

A new section has been added to the 2008 survey to explore the support and training given to managers and staff to ensure the effectiveness of flexible working.

A number of questions were asked about the support given to both managers and staff to operate flexible working effectively and how training and development have been adapted to respond to more diverse work patterns.

Nearly 89% give HR advice and give counselling and training (both 68%) but far fewer provide other forms of support.

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What support do you provide to managers and staff concerning effective flexible working?
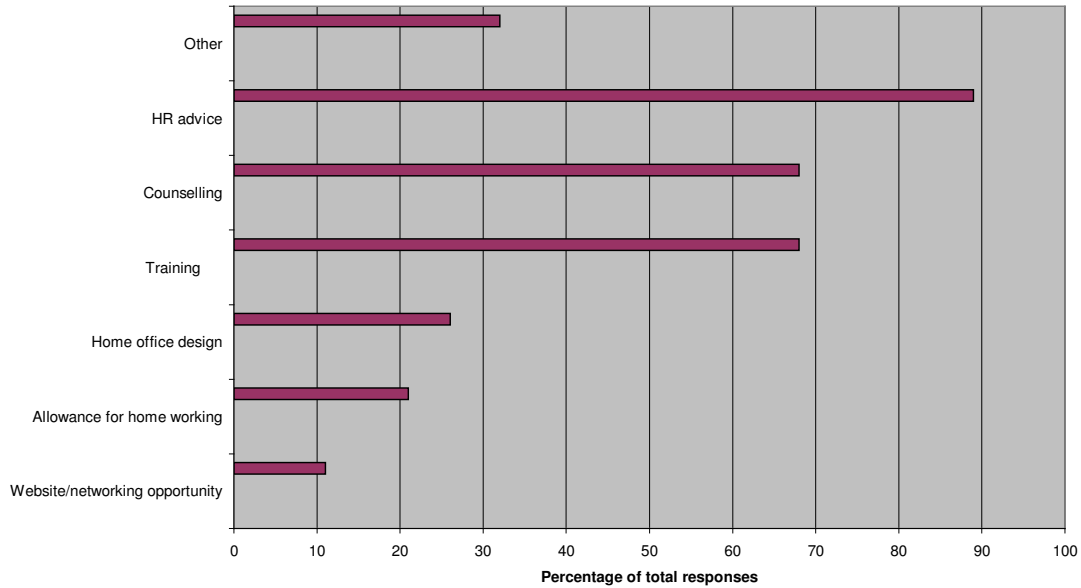
In addition one or two councils give advice on the ITC issues and one Council has a formal 'buddy' system.   A number give advice on Health and Safety issues involved in working mobiley and at home. Several mentioned that they produce guidance notes for managers on how to implement the policies.
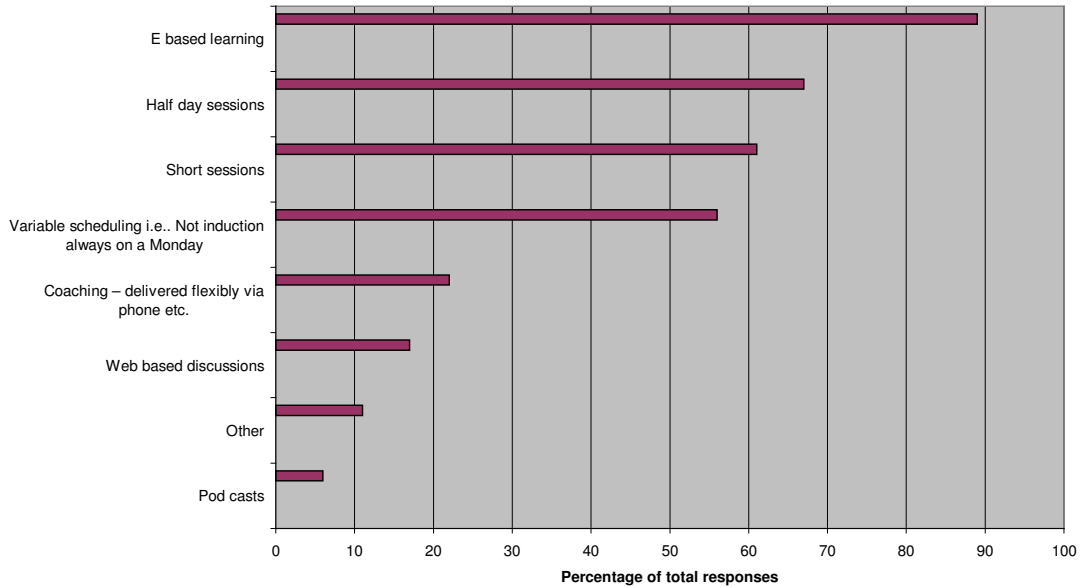
The next two questions indicate an opportunity for Councils to improve the effectiveness of the flexible working by providing suitable training for both managers and staff.

Do you incorporate flexible working into all training?	%
Yes	33
No	60
Don't know	7

Do you run stand alone programmes on flexible working?	%
Yes	38
No	62

An example of good practice was given by a London Borough which has a specific workshop covering topics including legal implications, policies, business benefits, issues, multiple requests, pitfalls to avoid, grievances, health and safety risk assessments, question and answer clinic, while another Council has an on line toolkit.

How have you amended the way you deliver training to respond to staff working flexibly?

Chart: horizontal bar chart showing "Percentage of total responses" (x-axis 0 to 100):
- E based learning: ~89
- Half day sessions: ~67
- Short sessions: ~61
- Variable scheduling i.e.. Not induction always on a Monday: ~56
- Coaching – delivered flexibly via phone etc.: ~22
- Web based discussions: ~17
- Other: ~11
- Pod casts: ~6

Question 12: In your opinion what are the main barriers to greater flexibility (perceived or actual)?

The top constraints for 2008 are the same as in 2006, though in a slightly different order.   ITC appears to be emerging as a more significant constraint moving to the top reported constraint in 2008 from 5th in 2006.

IT legacy systems and support for flexible working had been an issue for one respondent: *"The move from dial up is only just happening. Use of fixed IP addresses for "security reasons" and lots of other technical barriers."*

Manager's attitude are still seen as one of the major constraints in increasing the take up however there has been improvement in this area as one Council stated: "we have won that battle now and it is just business as usual".

One Council mentioned that Councillors' perception was a limiting factor.

Other issues mentioned were;
- Business case
- Data security fears
- Working with partners
- Culture
- Isolation, social aspects
- Hand held tools are expensive key boards are small
- Cost; accommodation type
- Staff lose pay if they reduce hours

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What are the main barriers to greater flexibility?
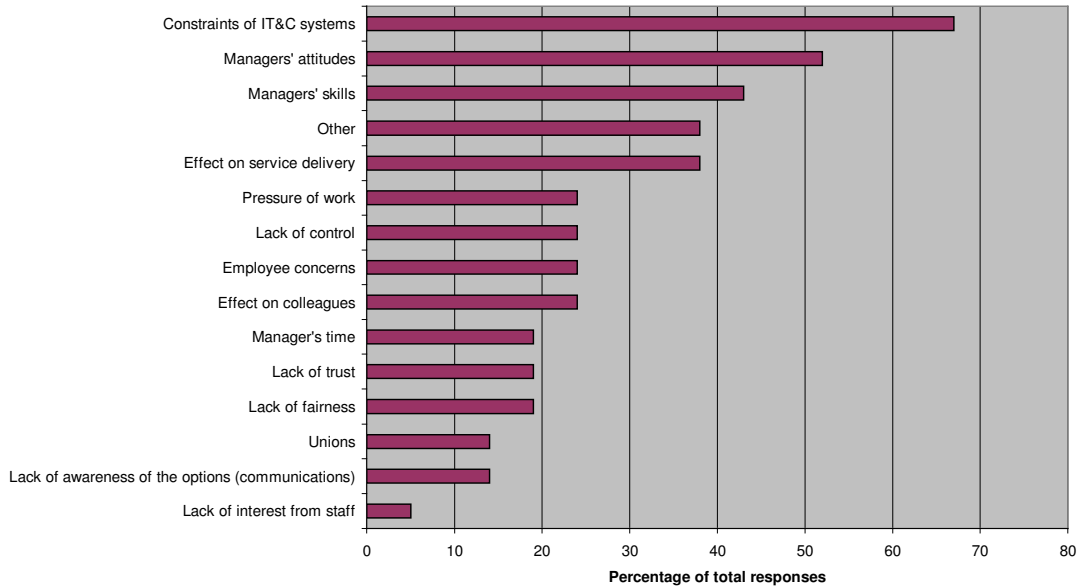
One Council's view is: *"Flexible working has not had such a big impact as managers thought as most staff are creatures of habit so as it has become more common they (managers) have accepted it"*

	Rank 2008	Rank 2006
Constraints of IT&C systems	1	5
Managers' attitudes	2	1
Managers' skills	3	2
Effect on service delivery	4=	3
Other	4=	4
Effect on colleagues	6=	7=
Employee concerns	6=	10=
Lack of control	6=	9
Pressure of work	6=	12
Lack of fairness	10=	13=
Lack of trust	10=	6
Manager's time	10=	10=
Lack of awareness (communications)	13=	7=
Unions	13=	13=
Lack of interest from staff	15	0

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Question 13 Experience of managing remote workers

We then asked a number of related and completely open narrative questions to explore the experience of managing remote workers.

The first question asked about what problems they had faced with managing remote workers. Some Councils reported that they had no major problems in this area and the issues had been resolved well. Other Councils reported a huge lack of skills. Several mentioned that a change in management style and culture is required to adjust to managing via outputs. Others problems faced included lack of clarity about contact expectations and working hours for remote workers, resistance from those left in the office and difficulty arranging meetings. One Council expressed concern that remote workers are sometimes not given the same key messages as office based workers leading to inconsistency in management treatment and that they are sometimes forgotten. As one Council stated "managers' attitudes and skills need to be raised as they need to lead from the front".

In our consultancy work, many people had raised the issue of how consistently of treatment could be achieved so we asked about this too. One council is working on this in terms of definitions/expectations, up till now anything has been possible/ negotiable within the HR framework.

Another Council felt that consistency was the biggest issue as up to now it has been the first come first served with statutory requests taking precedent. They have clarified the appeal process and identified 8 grounds for refusal. They have also established as policy that home workers can be called back in for cover: flexible working arrangements are not set in stone.

Other options include having central HR involved to review and monitor decisions and provide management coaching and training in how to operate the policies. Keeping in touch and effective supervision, management training, training managers to own flexible working were also mentioned.

A final question was "How much delegated responsibility does the manager have?"

This varied from full delegation to line managers within policy and budgets constraints to a partnership with HR but no one reported that all the decisions were taken centrally.

Some key learning points respondents raised were:
- We have not publicised flexible working enough – we need to make it easier to access
- A culture of trust is essential which is supportive with lots of training and where peers are encouraged to sort out any issues
- Flexible working exposes poor management so we need to provide lots of support and training